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INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VILNIUS 000013

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/04/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [EUN](#) [LH](#)
SUBJECT: LITHUANIA STRUGGLING TO MEET SCHENGEN REQUIREMENTS

Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief Rebecca Dunham for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)
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¶1. (C) Summary. Lithuania is in a race to meet Schengen requirements by early 2008, the anticipated date of Schengen expansion. Despite a contracting and spending spree in December 2006, Lithuania will struggle to meet the early 2008 deadline for implementation of Schengen requirements at its border checkpoints. End Summary.

Lithuania rushing to meet Schengen requirements

¶2. (C) Commander of the State Border Guard Service Saulius Stripeika told us that Lithuania will struggle to implement the necessary upgrades to meet its Schengen requirements by early 2008. On the margins of an EXBS donation ceremony December 19, Stripeika and his staff described an interministerial conference the government had held earlier that day on Lithuania's entry into the Schengen space. Stripeika said that Lithuania's support for Portugal's proposal to open the Schengen space to the ten new members of Europe by 2008 had been a political decision on the part of the GOL, but that the government institutions charged to implement reforms in fact need more time. The Ministry of Interior's Director for EU Affairs, Olegas Skinderskis, admitted to us January 8 that meeting the Schengen requirements by early 2008 would be a challenge, but that the government would do everything it could to make the date.

¶3. (SBU) According to the Interior Ministry, 72 percent of Lithuania's Schengen Facility funds for 2004-2007 (Euro 179 million in total) was obligated in December 2006, as the Ministry rushed to move on reforms following the EU's December 5 decision to allow the ten new members to enter Schengen under a modified version of Schengen Information System I. (The EU's failure to implement the Schengen Information System II had postponed Schengen's enlargement, drawing sharp criticism from the GOL.) Parliamentarian Petras Austrevicius complained publicly January 8 that the GOL had rushed the procurements through in the final days of December and that the projects were not well-planned and likely not to be implemented effectively. Vice Minister of the Interior Ciupaila said the GOL would be unable to implement electronic surveillance of Lithuania's border with Belarus and the Kaliningrad region of Russia by the time the GOL wants to enter Schengen. It would be possible to cover only about 60km of the 1000km of border with Russia and Belarus with the currently allocated funds. He suggested that the funds instead be used on other Schengen upgrades and that the border surveillance project be implemented with 2007-2013 EU funds.

Lithuania must improve security along external borders

¶4. (C) Director of the Interior Ministry's International Relations and EU Department Olegas Skinderskis told us that Lithuania did have a commitment to improve security along the

border with Belarus and Russia, but that implementation of the electronic surveillance project was probably not necessary to enter Schengen. "It just means we'll have to use more people," he said, refuting public comments by Member of the European Parliament Justas Paleckis that if the border remains insecure, "the doors to Schengen will open later." Asked whether he was worried about entering Schengen as anticipated in 2008, Skinderskis told us, "we have to see, but it is our goal," adding that the press had taken a "glass half empty" view of the situation. The Interior Ministry noted that the GOL also must install surveillance hardware in the Curonian Lagoon and the Baltic Sea, upgrade its international airports, develop and integrate a digital radio communication system, and in some cases construct or reconstruct external border checkpoints by early 2008 in order to enter Schengen at the earliest possibility.

15. (SBU) Speaking of the border checkpoints, Stripeika told us in December that the Border Guards were rushing to meet their procurement goals, but that construction and equipment upgrades of external checkpoints are only the first step. Lithuania still must develop and introduce a national Schengen information system, which requires laying the regulatory bases to apply Schengen rules, he said. This will require an interministerial process at least, he said, and may require action by the parliament. Once adopted, new rules and new equipment will require training programs that the service has not begun to consider, he said. Skinderskis agreed that based on recommendations by the European Commission, he believed implementation of the national Schengen information system to be a greater challenge to Lithuania's Schengen hopes than physical security.

16. (C) The MFA's point man on Schengen integration, Head of

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the Consular Department Vaidotas Verba, complained to us in June 2006 that the political scrambling following the government's collapse that summer impeded the government from moving forward on executive functions required to implement Schengen reforms. The government was incapable, he said at that time, of making the necessary interministerial decisions. He expects the Consular Department to be able to meet its obligations under the Schengen Accords and views recent GOL Schengen-compliance efforts as a firm step in the right direction.

Comment

17. (C) Political will for joining the Schengen space as a sign of deeper integration in the EU remains strong, even if the bureaucracy has failed to move quickly to implement Schengen requirements. A failure to join the Schengen space at the earliest time the EU allows would be a setback for the Kirkilas government. Like Lithuania's failure last year (under the previous government's watch) to qualify for the Euro, such an outcome would be construed here as a GOL failure to meet its central strategic goal of integrating as quickly as possible into important European arrangements.

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